

MODULE

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Did You Know It All Along?

Anything seems commonplace, once explained.

Dr. Watson to Sherlock Holmes

Do social psychology's theories provide *new insight* into the human condition? Or do they only describe the obvious? Many of the conclusions presented in this book will probably have already occurred to you, for social psychology is all around you. We constantly observe people thinking about, influencing, and relating to one another. Much of our thinking aims to discern and explain relationships among social events. It pays to know what that facial expression predicts, how to get someone to do something, or whether to regard another person as friend or foe. For centuries, philosophers, novelists, and poets have observed and commented upon social behavior, often with keen insight. Social psychology is everybody's business! As English philosopher Alfred North Whitehead noted, "Everything important has been said before."

Might it therefore be said that social psychology is only common sense in different words? Social psychology faces two contradictory criticisms: One is that it is trivial because it documents the obvious; the second is that it is dangerous because its findings could be used to manipulate people. Is the first objection valid—does social psychology simply formalize what any amateur already knows intuitively?

Cullen Murphy (1990) thinks so: "Day after day social scientists go out into the world. Day after day they discover that people's behavior is pretty much what you'd expect." Nearly a half century earlier, historian Arthur

Schlesinger, Jr., (1949) reacted with similar scorn to social scientists' studies of American World War II soldiers, as reported in the two volumes of *The American Soldier*.

What were *The American Soldier's* findings? Another reviewer, Paul Lazarsfeld (1949), offered a sample with interpretive comments, a few of which I paraphrase:

1. Better-educated soldiers suffered more adjustment problems than less-educated soldiers. (Intellectuals were less prepared for battle stresses than were street-smart people.)
2. Southern soldiers coped better with the hot South Sea island climate than did Northern soldiers. (Southerners are more accustomed to hot weather.)
3. White privates were more eager to be promoted to noncommissioned officer than were Black privates. (Years of oppression take a toll on achievement motivation.)
4. Southern Blacks preferred Southern to Northern White officers (because Southern officers were more experienced and skilled in interacting with Blacks).

One problem with common sense, however, is that we invoke it *after* we know the facts. Events are far more "obvious" and predictable in hindsight than beforehand. Experiments reveal that when people learn the outcome of an experiment, that outcome suddenly seems unsurprising—certainly less surprising than it is to people who are simply told about the experimental procedure and the possible outcomes (Slovic & Fischhoff, 1977).

You perhaps experienced this phenomenon when reading Lazarsfeld's summary of *The American Soldier* findings. For actually, Lazarsfeld (1949) went on to say, "*every one of these statements is the direct opposite of what was actually found.*" In reality, the book reported that poorly educated soldiers adapted more poorly. Southerners were *not* more likely than Northerners to adjust to a tropical climate. Blacks were *more* eager than Whites for promotion, and so forth. "If we had mentioned the actual results of the investigation first [as Schlesinger experienced], the reader would have labelled these 'obvious' also."

Likewise, in everyday life we often do not expect something to happen until it does. We *then* suddenly see clearly the forces that brought it about and feel unsurprised. After Ronald Reagan's presidential victory over Jimmy Carter in 1980, commentators—forgetting that the election had been "too close to call" until the campaign's final few days—found the Reagan landslide unsurprising. When Martin Bolt and John Brink (1991) invited Calvin College students to predict the U.S. Senate vote on controversial Supreme Court nominee Clarence

Thomas, 58 percent predicted his approval. A week after his confirmation, they asked other students to recall what they would have predicted. "I thought he would be approved," said 78 percent. As the Danish philosopher-theologian Søren Kierkegaard put it, "Life is lived forwards, but understood backwards."

If this **hindsight bias** (also called the I-knew-it-all-along phenomenon) is pervasive, you might now be feeling that you already knew about it. Indeed, almost any conceivable result of a psychological experiment can seem like common sense—*after* you know the result. Here's how you can demonstrate the phenomenon:

Tell one group one psychological finding and tell another group the opposite result. For example, tell one group:

Social psychologists have found that, whether choosing friends or falling in love, we are most attracted to people whose traits are different from our own. There seems to be wisdom in the old saying, "Opposites attract."

Tell the other group:

Social psychologists have found that, whether choosing friends or falling in love, we are most attracted to people whose traits are similar to our own. There seems to be wisdom in the old saying, "Birds of a feather flock together."

Ask each group first to explain the result. Then ask them to say whether it is "surprising" or "not surprising." Virtually all will find whichever result they were given "not surprising."

As this example shows, we can draw upon our stockpile of proverbs to make almost any result seem to make sense. Shall we say with John Donne, "No man is an island," or with Thomas Wolfe, "Every man is an island"? If a social psychologist reports that separation intensifies romantic attraction, Joe Public responds, "You get paid for this? Everybody knows that 'absence makes the heart grow fonder.'" Should it turn out that separation weakens attraction, Judy Public might say, "My grandmother could have told you, 'Out of sight, out of mind.'" No matter what happens, there will be someone who knew it would.

Karl Teigen (1986) must have had a few chuckles when asking University of Leicester (England) students to evaluate actual proverbs and their opposites. When given the actual proverb "Fear is stronger than love," most rated it as true. But so did students who were given its reversed form, "Love is stronger than fear." Likewise, the genuine proverb "He that is fallen cannot help him who is down" was rated highly; but so too was "He that is fallen can help him who is down." My favorites, however, were these two highly rated proverbs: "Wise men make proverbs and fools repeat them" (authentic) and its made-up counterpart, "Fools make proverbs and wise men repeat them."

The hindsight bias creates a problem for many psychology students. Sometimes results are genuinely surprising (for example, that Olympic bronze medalists take more joy in their achievement than do silver medalists). More often, when you read the results of experiments in your textbooks, the material often seems easy, even obvious. When you later take a multiple-choice test on which you must choose among several plausible conclusions, the task can become surprisingly difficult. "I don't know what happened," the befuddled student later moans. "I thought I knew the material." (A word to the wise: Beware of this phenomenon when studying for exams, lest you fool yourself into thinking that you know the material better than you do.)

The I-knew-it-all-along phenomenon not only can make social science findings seem like common sense. It also can have pernicious consequences, because it is conducive to arrogance—an overestimation of our own intellectual powers. Moreover, because outcomes seem as if they should have been foreseeable, we are more likely to blame decision makers for what are in retrospect "obvious" bad choices than to praise them for good choices, which also seem "obvious." *After* the 1991 Persian Gulf War, it seemed obvious that the overwhelming air superiority of the United States and its allies would rout the Iraqi military, though that was hardly clear to most politicians and pundits beforehand.

Likewise, we sometimes blame ourselves for "stupid mistakes," such as not having handled a situation or a person better. Looking back, we see how we should have handled it. But sometimes we are too hard on ourselves. We forget that what is obvious to us *now* was not nearly so obvious at the time. Physicians who are told both a patient's symptoms and the cause of death (as determined by autopsy) sometimes wonder how an incorrect diagnosis could have been made. Other physicians, given only the symptoms, don't find the diagnosis nearly so obvious (Dawson & others, 1988). (Would juries be slower to assume malpractice if they were forced to take a foresight rather than a hindsight perspective?)

So what do we conclude? That common sense is usually wrong? Sometimes it is. Until science dethroned the commonsense view, centuries of daily experience assured people that the sun revolved around the earth. Medical experience assured doctors that bleeding was an effective treatment for typhoid fever, until someone in the middle of the last century bothered to experiment—to divide patients into two groups, one bled, the other given mere bed rest.

Other times, conventional wisdom is right—or it falls on both sides of an issue: Does happiness come from knowing the truth, or preserving illusions? from being with others, or from living in peaceful solitude? from living a virtuous life, or from getting away with evil? Opinions are a dime a dozen; no matter what we find, there will be someone who foresaw it. But which of the many competing ideas best fit reality?

So the point is not that common sense is predictably wrong. Rather, common sense usually is right *after the fact*. We therefore easily deceive ourselves into thinking that we know and knew more than we do and did. And this is precisely why we need science—to help us sift reality from illusion, and genuine predictions from easy hindsight.

CONCEPT TO REMEMBER

Hindsight bias The tendency to exaggerate, *after* learning an outcome, one's ability to have foreseen how something turned out. Also known as the *I-knew-it-all-along phenomenon*.